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ABSTRACT

Diversity and change seem to be the central experiences of Western peoples at this point in the twentieth century. Students, now more than ever, need to be given a sense of hope and of the perfectability of humankind. This commentary provides impressionistic description of issues and experiences in the teaching of interdisciplinary humanities courses at both secondary and college levels. A hypothetical course entitled "Man's Futures: The Possibility of Perfectability; or, An Exploration of Change and Choice" is described. This course, adaptable to various grade levels, would involve teachers from many subject fields and would provide students with the motivation to learn the basics in math, science, English, and Latin. (KS)

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The Greening of America That Was: An Essay on Hope

Diversity, change, a sense of being disconnected, of floating in an indifferent sea of conflicting values, these seem to be the central experiences of western man at this point in the twentieth century. A terrifying ennui, a sense of powerlessness, a loss of hope mark people's attitudes toward their lives, their futures, their dreams. For the moment there seems to be no compelling dream, no evolving order, no promising prospect. Western man finds himself swimming through seas of shredded computer printouts and system analyses, looking ahead through clouds of faintly sweet smelling photo-chemicals, to thickening clouds of even sweeter smelling poisons.

And I receive this invitation. Speak to your brethren, the other purveyors of the old dreams; tell them about "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity." The very sound of it is something like a machine fart, genteel of course, perfumed and hissing. It does have the virtue of such things, a hospitable ambiguity, an openess to being misunderstood. I tried being honest about it, and sent the following note to the NCTE machine.

Dear NCTE,

While I have some ideas about Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Diversity, I am not sure what the program planners had in mind with this title. I might, for example, be able to discuss the way in which a Humanities course I teach, The Artist and the Greening of America explores value differences between youth and the general culture. I am in the process of preparing a Humanities course called Establishments and Minorities which will explore cultural diversity through the arts; it might examine ethnicity, the politics of minorities, sex/age group diversity, rural-urban value conflicts, etc. To be candid about it, however, the course is one I'll be teaching for the first time. It was

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developed by Dr. Fred Schroeder of our department and he might be a better spokesman about the course than I. I would be happy to participate, and willing to work at developing whatever topic the program planners had in mind, but would appreciate a bit of guidance.

I recieved no response; and so I come to you to speak of the Greening of America that was, of looking back at human consciousness to find the thin edge of the human spirit, that sense of the difference between what is and what might be, hope.

But why this oracular stance, you might ask. Why does this pretentious little wop want to lay a sermon on us? I mean for Christ sake, it's only a section at NCTE. Who cares? Well, I've not been invited before, and who knows when it'll happen again, and besides it's time for us to talk again of these old questions. Romance is going out of our professional lives, and perhaps we can soften the horrors of the new basic skills version of classicism; at least we can remind ourselves that we won't really convince our students about the old virtues unless they can hope in tomorrow. If groovin' and rappin' with kids is bullshit, and I think it is, so is grammar. This time we ought to make a stand, a stand against the recycling of old mistakes, against the newest fad-wagon, against standardized tests, and for a vision of our tasks as teachers that demands as much lip service to hope, truth, justice, and the search for values as it does to narrow journalistic conceptions of good usage. This time we ought to pay as much attention to Cardinal Newman and <u>The Idea of a University</u> as we do to Edward Newman and the search for truth, utility, and better language at NBC.

So let me begin with my daughter, Maribeth. Three years ago, at the age of

12 she switched to the "open school" that finally appeared in Duluth. She followed her younger brothers out of "traditional" schools into a middle class liberal dream of what freedom and education had to do with each other. Shortly after she started, she stopped me in the middle of our upstairs hallway, dropped to the floor and crossed her legs Indian-style. I knew she wanted to talk. Some lessons the Open School taught very well. She opened with, "Dad, there is nothing that is right in the world." I looked at her and then I sat down. I talked about how Carol and I loved her, and how she loved her mother and me; about Ed and Peter; about the times in the woods when we all danced, and came to feel at one with each other and the green and growing earth. You see, even though I know about teenage overstatements and self consciousness, and coming of age, I was shocked. She meant it. She meant it in a way no one I had known in all my youth meant it. And she was speaking not just for herself. She'd been talking to twelfth graders and teachers, to young people she knew were bright and they'd told her about corporations and governments, about pollution and war, about death and madness. Her generation has a clear sense of how slim the chances are that man will prevail, even in the limited sense of dying well, of leaving a healthy world for whatever new forms of life evolution is hatching. She knows, and so do her friends that we can blow it all; may in fact already have done so to make our armpits smell different. She and they wonder if anything they will or can do, can make a difference. I'm not certain they can, but then no one has ever been certain how all this consciousness would turn out. Once the species became the species, it had both the hope of life and the certainty of death. "Will the species survive?" is not a new question; though it does seem, somehow, more pertinent at this moment. Perhaps only because we're the ones asking and answering it.

I didn't really answer Maribeth that day three years ago, and we haven't really talked as directly since, but I've been trying to find answers. I've noticed how often the question is there, in one form or another, in what all of us say and do. I notice, for example, that when we all looked hard at the energy crisis and thought about the future, we slowed down to 55 and turned down the thermostats. Since we've stopped looking and we're back at 70 and going hot and heavy. Sometimes we all seem to me to be "carpe diem"ing ourselves into and out of everything from sex to snowmobiles. I don't know that we shouldn't be, but I sense a kind of desperateness in all of it that I want to quarrel with. In fact, I think education must quarrel with it, calling at once for some return to our traditions and for some change in our ways. Recently in teaching some Humanities courses to "rusty" ladies and "shiny" kids, and in talking with the secondary school teachers about science fiction, the future and interdisciplinary studies, I've begun to get some feeling for the shape of my quarrel with despair.

In 1969 the "rusty" ladies decided they wanted to know what was in the "stuff" their flower-children sons and daughters were listening to and reading. The ladies call themselves "rusty". They are well educated housewives who want to understand the world around them. They are the best of students, who, without tests or grades or credits, for the sheer sake of knowing, read everything on time, and want to talk about it, at length. I've only had as much fun teaching 7th graders, and then only when I was very good. The ladies never waited for that. Together we talked of rock music and Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, Loren Eisley, Herman Hesse, Neil Postman, Ralph Ellison, N. Scott Momaday and Robert Heinlein. We struggled through Charles Reich's painful prose to try to understand what consciousness III was, and wondered if we could (or wanted to) achieve it. The course was as interdisciplinary as the Beatles, Jesus Christ Superstar,

Jimi Hendrix's Star Spangled Banner, Eisleys treatise on the meaning of evolution, a couple of popular philosophers and a 33 year old English teacher with an undergraduate philosophy minor, who can't read a note of music, could make it. But, at moments, it worked, and the ladies cried over "She's Leaving Home" understanding that the Beatles weren't really convinced a runaway could find true love with a used car salesman, that the human dimensions of the Christ still held meaning for some of their children, that you could hear the agony of blackness, hope for man's continuing evolution, prepare for the future, and take joy in the "Greening of America." We even came to see the naive romanticism of it all, and sensed the possibility for madness implicit in the new consciousness, and I remember we noted the step from Hesse's Steppenwolfe to the Third Reich and the ubermensch was short. We worried about that. In the end we got a sense of diversity, of the differences between the "younger generation" and ourselves, and wished them well in their pursuit of our dreams.

A year or two later the ladies wanted to look at the future; and this time we managed to get five faculty members, a philosopher, a mathematician, a biologist, a sociologist, and me to work with them. They still wore us out. I taught some science fiction from a collection called Survival Printout edited by a computer; the mathematician compared the predictive accuracy of the club of Rome's Limits of Growth with the accuracy of Kurt Vonnegut's Player Piano, and decided Vonnegut and other artists might be right about as often as the scientists. The biologist talked about Utopian Motherhood and genetic control. The philosopher analyzed Rozak's Where the Wasteland Ends. The sociologist took us into a post-bureaucratic society. We ended by stretching the course into a second year and I got a chance to lay Ursula LeGuin's The Dispossessed and Harlan Ellison's "Repent Harlequin Cried the Tick-Tock Man", beside Elaine Morgan's The Descent

of Woman chosen by our biologist, and Man Alone, a study of alienation in the twentieth century, chosen by the philosopher. The mathematician had us all play a game called Global Futures and our sociologist set it all in the context of a sociological model for changing ourselves and the world. To say that we enjoyed the experience and learned from each other is too weak. Those two years represented for all the faculty and, I think, for most of our students, an educational experience that took us out of the narrow confines of specializations and toward what a liberal education ought to be about. We acquired a sense of the limitless problems and promises of alternative futures, a sense of the long history of Woman's struggle with destiny, and some sense that what lay ahead for the species, given some fortunate accidents of a type common to human history, might not be any worse than what lay behind. We came to know that in the differences that lay between us, we had the only means available to overcome the limitations of our habitual ways of thinking and knowing. We came to celebrate our diversity.

Last spring the National Humanities Faculty sent me to Colorado Springs to talk with some teachers who were thinking about trying to develop a humanities course option for secondary school students in District 11. The team included Latin teachers, mathematicians, science fiction fans, biologists, art teachers, musicians and others. They'd been visited by various humanists and wanted to "do something", but they were concerned about two problems: the integrity of their disciplines and the need to assure the development of basic skills. As we talked about these problems, it became clear to us that students have a considerable problem acquiring skills to master disciplines that seem to be telling them "there's no tomorrow." We agreed that the students needed to know the truth, needed to know the odds were long, but we wanted them to know that the odds have always been long, that the species has faced disaster and prevailed,

that there was and is hope. We found, between us, a course we called Man's Future: The Possibility of Perfectability. Let me outline for you a shape of that course to come, the bare bones of what those teachers want to give to children in order to supply them with a reason to master Math, Science, English and Latin.

MAN'S FUTURES: THE POSSIBILITY OF PERFECTABILITY...
An Exploration of Change and Choice

Objectives

1. To explore with students alternative solutions for some of the most significant problems of today and tomorrow

2. To develop students' literacy in the basic disciplines through interdisciplinary study

3. To develop in students an awareness of the interrelatedness of various ways of knowing and of the value of interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving

4. To give students a sense of power and hope about man's capacity to solve problems and about their own ability to aid in that process

Basic Course Strategy

The course will be interdisciplinary, involving teachers from at least three subject areas in planning and teaching topics. Topics will vary from school to school and grade level to grade level. Approximately 75 - 100 students will be involved in each school. All courses will be electives which will not substitute for required course work in the subject areas.

Some Questions and Assumptions To Be Explored

1. All notions of perfectability spring from tha faith that since man is aware of himself, he can change himself and/or his world.

2. Inherent in this idea is the belief that man can choose his own future.

3. What are the available choices and which ones should we make?
   a. in our personal lives
   b. in our social order

4. Are our choices determined? If so, what difference does that make?

5. Americans have tended to see the future as a promise, as the fufillment of the American Dream. What chances are there of realizing that dream?

Possibilities for Organization

1. A history of the perfectability of man
2. Gods and heroes as models of perfection (myths of perfectability)
3. Perfecting the species: evolution and awareness
4. Ideal views of man: from Plato to Heinlein
5. Societies Perfect and Imperfect: The Republic to The Dispossessed
6. Perfecting and knowledge: awareness perfected
7. Perfecting our control of the world
8. Evolution and revolution as the search for perfection
9. How to perfect the future and/or ourselves

The course is an exploration of the diversity of the human past in order to discover the possibilities of a human future.

At present I'm teaching a new version of the course about the Greening of America to undergraduates. I wish I had time to explore with you the differences between the way my "shiny" students and those "rusty" ladies comport themselves. Let it suffice to say that all that glitters is not enlightened. My students and I are, however, finding that the popular artists of the sixties like Paul Simon, John Lennon, Robert Heinlein, Loren Eisley, Roger Corman, Richard Brautigan, Andy Warhol, Ken Kesey, Frank Zappa, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and others, believe, with Charles Reich, that human beings can change themselves and the world around them, can perfect the species and preserve life. I think my students need this. I think they need to be reminded that the artists and dreamers were, on balance, right. They need to be reminded because 1960, even 1970, seems far away for them and me. I played parts of Kennedy's inaugural for them, and asked them if they could believe any politician saying such things. I think you know what their answer was. The world seems to be changing at such a rate that their childhood is light years away from their adulthood, and they find themselves living in an alien culture, lost in diversity, needing to understand the roots and riches of their differences.

I may not be able to do it, but I am interested in giving students such understanding. I want to share with them some gifts. The gifts I want to give are the gifts I received. My father, a second generation Italian American gave them to me. There were two. First he gave me a faith in knowing, a belief that I could learn, that man could learn to be other than he is. He almost finished a bachelor's degree in business through the Universities' Extension Division. He worked at it until he married at age 35. He stopped going to regular classes at the age of sixteen. I can remember his taking my brothers and I to the St. Paul Public Library every Saturday morning and waiting for an hour or two, while we found what we wanted. As the father of three teenagers, that patience awes me, especially because I remember how many things my father had no patience for. When I went through my PhD graduation at age 34, my father kissed me on the steps of Morrill Hall. It was the first kiss in 20 years and we both knew whose dream I was living out. For as long as I can remember, even when we yelled and shouted at each other (as Italian fathers and sons will) about my changing from Physics to English, he said, "Whatever you learn no one can take away from you." Vocational education was not his concern, nor is it mine.

The second gift he gave me was a faith that what I did mattered; that what I said counted; that each human being made choices that effect others; that each human being had to choose what he or she thought was right; and that those choices had to be respected even if I didn't think they were right. You should understand that he had as much difficulty living up to these ideas as we all do. When I asked him if I could bring home Woody, a boy I'd met at the YMCA, he told me I couldn't because Woody was a nigger. I couldn't understand him and he knew it, and when I told him, surprised a bit by my own daring, that he was wrong and prejudiced, he surprised me more by not arguing back. Years later, after

arguments too numerous and complicated to detail, and suddenly forced to some statement by the brutality of Martin Luther King's murder and the agony of yet another ritual of mourning for a public symbol of America's hopes, he said, "You know, Tom, his people did him proud."

Perhaps his reaction to The Greening of America is even more illuminating. My younger brother, a man less given to talking and more given to doing than I am, had moved with his family into an urban commune, and had given my father a copy of Reich's book for a Father's Day present. Dad took The Greening of America to the lake and read it in one weekend. He began by underlining and writing his responses in the margins; he stopped that after a bit, and ended by calling my brother and saying, "I've read the book. I still think you're wrong, but it's a beautiful dream and I wish you well." I hope that at 68, I've learned to value what people do to change themselves and their world enough to wish them well in remaking my world, and I want my students to be that liberally educated, that humane, that accepting of diversity.

Perhaps the best emblem of the gifts of hope I received is in my name. You may be wondering about an Italian named Bacig. Well, for my father, the gift of hope was in becoming an American. His father came from Italy and a slate mine near Genoa. When the Second World War started my father wanted there to be no confusions about where his hopes lay. He changed Bacigalupo to Bacig, to give his sons their gift of hope, uncluttered by older rivalries and dead traditions. Since, we've told him that he was wrong, that the melting pot should not require one to hide his differences, that only by exploring our diversity can American culture understand itself, that our schools should teach ethnic studies, that we should speak Italian. But my brothers and I aren't changing the name back.

We recognize the validity of his dream in ours, and gestures and an appreciation for diversity do matter.

Let me close where I began. Part of the answer Maribeth, for you and yours, lies in coming to have hope. Yes we will all die, and there is no Santa Claus, but there is life and awareness and species specific behavior. Win or lose, up or down the great chain of being, whatever the lot of all of us, I want you to know what your Grandfather knows, what the race knows, what it has known in every dark moment in the past, what it will know unto oblivion - "Hope springs eternal."